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ABSTRACT

This paper advances a taxonomy of college writing styles based on a broad spectrum of writing research. The taxonomy focuses on the constructs of deep and surface writing and the role of selfhood in affecting writing strategies and outcomes. It compares constructs such as reflective versus reproductive, hierarchical versus linear, active versus passive, and autonomous versus rule-bound. The model is comprehensive because it explains both deep and surface orientations as reflective of the interrelationships of writing beliefs, writing strategies, and the written product. It also notes how teachers' beliefs about the nature and complexity of composition affect their own behavior which, in turn, influences student performance. The paper suggests that educators need to move toward recognizing and rewarding elaborative, self-invested writing. Recommendations for instruction include both effective support and strategies for promoting writing as an integrative instructional tool across content areas. (Contains 31 references.) (MDM)

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A Taxonomy of College Writing Styles

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Abstract

A taxonomy of college writing styles is advanced based on a broad spectrum of writing research conducted both in this country and abroad. The model is comprised of two distinct orientations--*deep*, involving a conception of oneself as an agent in making meaning and *surface*, linked to a more passive approach reliant on the reproduction or reorganization of information. The writing styles model is comprehensive because it explains both deep and surface orientations as reflective of the interrelationships of writing beliefs, writing strategies, and the written product. Recommendations for instruction involve both affective support, and strategies for promoting writing as an integrative instructional tool across content areas.

A Taxonomy of College Writing Styles

A taxonomy of college writing styles is developed based on synthesis of a wide range of research addressing individual differences in the writing processes. Core variations include the ways that writers think about themselves, and about writing, as well as the patterns of strategies that writers use to achieve their goals. When writing beliefs and the related pattern of strategies are consistent, they are called **writing styles** (Lavelle, 1993) or **approaches** (Biggs, 1988a). Writing styles represent qualitative variation in the ways that writers go about their tasks. The basic distinction is between a deep writing style which involves a high degree of personal involvement and surface writing style which is basically reproductive.

Writing style theories of composition have much to offer researchers and practitioners. They are comprehensive and dynamic in defining the *situation* of writing as involving complex personal variables (interior environment) as related to processes and outcomes (exterior environment), rather than considering processes as discrete (Hayes & Flower, 1980). More importantly, in emphasizing the role of the individual, the stylistic theories begin to explain how it is that critical beliefs such as one's conception of oneself as writer affect the writing situation. Previous models have linked the individual to writing in terms of self-efficacy (Lavelle, 1993; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Shell, 1986) and self-esteem (Daly & Wilson, 1983), but have not provided an indepth understanding of that relationship. Given the current concern about the declining writing skills of college students, it is particularly appropriate to develop a taxonomy of writing styles research and to examine the general implications of stylistic models for college instruction.

The Deep and Surface Connection

Writing style theories originate from three main sources--composition research, phenomenological research in education, and cognitive psychology. Although the methodologies and theoretical bases vary, the implications are similar--writing styles may be differentiated as reflecting two basic orientations--*deep*, involving maturity in writing and an empowered sense of selfhood including the conception of oneself as an agent in

making a meaning beyond the given words and a detached, or *surface* approach, reliant on the passive and linear reproduction of information.

Similarly, college learning theorists have described deep and surface orientations in college learning, or learning styles, as related to academic tasks such as reading (Marton & Saljo, 1976), studying (Schmeck, 1983), and academic writing (Lavelle, 1993; Biggs, 1988a). The basic distinction is between deep learners who display a "meaningful" orientation, are more personally involved and see the task as a whole, and surface learners who view the task as a demand, see the parts as unrelated and rely on memorization or reproduction strategies. Biggs (1988a) has noted:

> "The affective orientation of students with a deep approach starts with an intrinsic interest in the task and the expectation of enjoyment in carrying it out. Consequently, they adopt strategies that are likely to help satisfy their curiosity by searching for meanings inherent in the task. Students adopting a surface approach are instrumentally or pragmatically motivated...A task, such as an essay, is seen as a demand to be met, a necessary imposition if a longer term goal is to be achieved. This set of assumptions is frequently accompanied by worries about the time the task is taking ..The general strategy to which this orientation gives rise is to focus on what are seen to be essentials--usually factual data and the ways they are represented symbolically--to reproduce them as accurately as possible.(p. 186)

But what prompts "intrinsic interest in the task" and the search for meaning in writing? Several college learning researchers have described an elaborative learning style marked by experiential, self-involving, and self-referencing strategies which was related to the deep style (Schmeck et .al., 1991). Interestingly, Westman and Kamoo found that both deep and elaborative processors think more abstractly about all global life and death issues but only those high on elaborative processing scale think abstractly about their own death (cited in Schmeck et. al., 1991). In line with the college learning style research, Lavelle (1993) found a relationship between deep and elaborative styles in college writing.

Intrinsic interest rests not only on being able to "fully" view one's subject, but in being able to see one's self, and, one's subject in relation to one's self. In particular, revision demands willingness to take perspective on oneself as writers examine their products. The notion of deep and surface styles and an empowered selfhood as related to writing outcomes is recurrent in the writing styles literature, beginning with research involving children.

In researching the writing processes of second-graders, Graves (1973) found two distinct writing styles--reactive writers who focused at the word level with little reflection or concern for audience and reflective writers who reread periodically and exhibited a growing sense of self-expression and of audience. Similarly, Scardamalia and Bereiter (1982) differentiated between a "knowledge telling" vs. a "knowledge transforming strategy" among novice writers, and Dyson (1987) found "socializers" focused on words and "symbolizers" focused on meaning. In a nut shell, Graves defined the writers--reflective and reactive, and Scardamalia and Bereiter have described the corresponding strategies--knowledge transforming and knowledge telling. But being reflective demands separating oneself from one's writing and taking perspective--that's where transformation comes in. Just as Dyson's symbolizers see the words as representational rather than as literal, or, rather, they focus on what is 'sign'ified (meaning) rather than on the sign (words) (cf. Marton, 1988). Deep writers are going beyond reproduction because they have a qualitatively different perspective--one reliant on a crystallized sense of self (cf. McCarthy & Schmeck, 1988).

This does not mean that children are "locked" into a particular orientation. In tracing early reading behavior, Kirby (1988) found that children moved from a global phase (treating the text as whole rather than as a set of words to an analytic phase ("cracking the code", learning the symbols) and then to the synthetic phase (using the best parts of the preceding schemes). Extreme "embededness" in either the global or analytic orientations could result in reading problems, but the influence of those early orientations persists with global types using context as a clue for the meaning of an unknown word (deep/meaning/holistic) and analytic types (surface/linear/low focus) opting for a phonetic solution in the same situation.

The general argument here is for a developmental understanding of the progressive nature of writing competence as involving qualitatively distinct orientations rather than the cumulative acquisition of skills. Stylistic orientations reflect a consistent perspective based on a set of assumptions about one's relationship to writing and the related pattern of writing behaviors. Just as the strategies that writers use vary in terms of being primarily writer-related (clarifying the thesis) or task-related (grammar and punctuation), so to theories of writing styles may be organized from the more global, or ideational, to those reflecting specific writing behaviors. Belief theories represent the most personal and intimate domain. The Cognitive Developmental theories then trace the evolution of involvement and complexity in writing. Finally, Approach models, the most interactive of the three perspectives, expand on these notions by directly linking beliefs to the strategies that college writers use which, subsequently, affect written outcomes.

Beliefs of College Students about Writing

Beliefs comprise the most intimate domain of the interior writing environment and perhaps the most influential. Beliefs about oneself, writing, and one's relation to writing affect writing intentions (e.g. to make a meaning/self-discovery, please the teacher, or just get it over with). Too often cognitive and composition studies have overlooked this important factor. Hounsell's research on students' beliefs as related to writing outcomes represents the phenomenological research tradition, whereas Ryan, and Silva and Nicholls combine methods.

In examining college students' conceptions of the essay, Hounsell (1984) identified three main conceptions that hinged on students' beliefs about data, organization and the role of interpretation. The "essay as argument" conception was cited as the most explicit and sophisticated in that it represented a concern for the essay as an integrated whole with a distinctive perspective supported by evidence. The essay as "viewpoint" conception differed from the argument conception in that the role of data is not explicitly considered as impacting on thesis. Rather, ideas are organized to support a distinctive point of view. From the viewpoint perspective interrelations between data and a perhaps well-organized

format may not be clear. The "arrangement" conception is defined as an ordered presentation of facts and ideas. The process is basically reproductive. The arrangement conception is superficial, separating the basic components--thesis, data and organization. Students' conceptions were related to grade in the course with argumentatives receiving the highest grades followed by viewpoints and arrangement receiving the lowest.

Similarly, in this country, Ryan (1984) identified four different conceptions of prose coherence from college students' written responses to a coherence probe. Two of these conceptions, informativeness and grouping, failed to address the quality of the relationship among various parts of the paper, similar to Hounsell's arrangement conception. The remaining two, sequencing and unity did provide such a basis with sequencing implying ordering of parts within a framework, and unity stressing integrated elaboration of a single idea (similar to Hounsell's argument conception). Sequencing and unity beliefs were associated with relativistic conceptions of knowledge and superior essay performance in terms of coherence. Both sequencing and unity imply an understanding of composition as a hierarchical ordering of information, with unity emphasizing integration reflective of deep, active processes.

More recently, Silva and Nicholls (1993) linked college writers' goals and beliefs to committment and perceived ability. In particular, the *Poetic* dimension included personal meaning and self-expression with the *Growth* conception related to intellectual development--deep writing. The third scale, *Method* described students who followed the rules and the *Surface* orientation described concern for correctness of form--a more superficial or surface approach. *Poetic* and *Growth* scale scores were related to commitment to writing and confidence in one's own ability.

Thus the deep perspective on the meaning of written composition implies beliefs about oneself as an agent in making meaning (an arguer vs. an organizer), reflects complex beliefs about the interrelation of data and structure and concern for the essay as an integrated whole aimed at personal meaning. In contrast, surface conceptions include emphasis on ordering or listing data and little personal involvement in an effort to "tell something." In an article entitled "The Uninvolved=Poor Writers", Moxley drew similar

conclusions--the "uninvolved" perceived their roles as following orders as opposed to the more mature conception involving writing as a personal learning process (1987).

Cognitive Development in College Writing

Cognitive developmental theory posits development in writing as a gradual and organized progression of changes over a period of time. Since the emphasis is on naturally occurring stages, rather than on instruction or task environment, developmental models lie between the Belief Models and the more interactionist perspectives of the Approach Theories. In the sixties and seventies a great deal of developmental research focused on intellectual development of students over the college years. In particular, college writing researchers adopted Perry's model of intellectual development (1970) and applied it to college writing (Hayes, 1983). Other theoreticians developed models specifically geared at understanding progressive changes in writing extending from childhood through the college years. The cognitive developmental approach to understanding college writing is based on increasingly complex assumptions about the writing process, audience and about oneself as writer. Bereiters' Model traces the interrelationship of writing skills and social cognition and Biggs offers a succinct Piagetian-based taxonomy considering essay outcomes as reflective of levels of cognition.

Bereiter (1980) conceived of writing development as occurring in six structurally distinct stages representing various levels of fluency, mastery of writing conventions, social cognition, literary discrimination, social cognition and reflective thought. In associative writing, the writer writes whatever comes to mind in the original order of thinking--a listing strategy, and performative writing, the next level, incorporates the conventions of style and mechanics. Communicative writing is integrated with social cognition to include audience. Similarly, Flower (1979) has identified reader-based prose as involving consideration of the reader as opposed to writer-based prose which is geared only toward self-expression. Unified writing, Bereiter's fifth level, includes skill in developing one's own perspective as reader and critic and parallels the rise of metacognition associated with adolescence. Finally, Epistemic writing includes the development of reflective thought

processes as writers use writing as a personal search for meaning. Unified and epistemic writing, Bereiter's deep stages, imply a high level of self-awareness/definition in terms of being able to criticize one's writing and in reaching relativistic thinking.

Based on Piagetian principles, Biggs and Collis (1982) related the quality of learning to the structural complexity of the written product. The Structure Of Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy was designed to reflect narrative writing on a continuum from the less to more complex forms. The lowest level, Prestructural writing, was often incoherent based on fleeting words or impressions and was egocentric, in the Piagetian sense. Unistructural writing involves sequencing and usually has a beginning, middle and end but is concrete much like Bereiter's associative level. Multistructural writing is basically linear but is embellished, often with clichés. The conventions of writing are used but not integrated to achieve maximum effect. Relational writing is the effective use of basic writing skills to produce a calculated effect but is limited to the chosen context--a kind of "pulp fiction". The technical components have been mastered and unity and purpose achieved but the "narrative remains firmly within the experience of the writer". Intentionality has come into play, similar to Bereiter's Unified stage. Finally, Extended Abstract includes metaphoric skill to carry meaning beyond the chosen context and the creative application of conventions to convey multiple meanings. In extended abstract writing, the words clearly become the servant of the message. The SOLO taxonomy has been applied to objective writing as well as narrative (Biggs, 1988).

Both models stress the acquisition of skill, genre familiarity and audience concern as marking the early stages of writing. However, later stages imply more dramatic and far reaching changes along three lines-- taking perspective as reader, becoming agentic in making a meaning, and an increased sense of intentionality-- awareness of "layers of meaning", or going beyond the given context. I think writers at these last stages, Bereiter's Epistemic and Biggs' extended abstract, finally realize that the "sum is greater than the parts" and that they are the makers of meaning. It is as though "composition", as a fully intentional and hierarchical expression (deep) takes the place of "writing" as the linear ordering of discreet ideas (surface).

Approaches to College Writing

Rooted in Information Processing theory, Approach Models represent the most interactive perspective because they not only emphasize characteristics of the individual writer but also account for the specific strategies (behaviors) that writers employ when faced with a writing task. In the Approaches to Writing Models, strategies serve as negotiating links between the writer and the writing "solution", and, as such, the approach models offer direct implications for educational practice. Biggs' model (1988a) represents the integration of his theory of learning styles (1987) with the SOLO taxonomy and I have drawn on that model in constructing the Inventory of Processes in College Composition (Lavelle, 1993).

In devising a taxonomy of college writing, Biggs (1988a) has related the major learning approaches--deep and surface to five sublevels of writing. Approaches are differentiated in terms of the intentions of the student and by the writing and prewriting strategies employed. In the surface-subjective approach, the intention is to "just answer the question" and planning is minimal and focus is at the word level. Similarly, the Surface-restrictive approach involves the intention to answer the question with minimal involvement and essay structure is linear or time-sequenced. Surface-elaborative approach includes the motive of doing a good job and a "putting information together" strategy with focus still, primarily at the word level. In the Deep-integrated approach, the writer thinks of the task as a learning experience, adopts the particular genre and attends to both global and local concerns. In the Deep-reflective approach, the emphasis is on creativity and a higher level of abstraction. Biggs (1988a) differentiates between the deep and surface approaches:

> The surface and deep approaches differ in two main ways: in their process and in their outcome. The deep processes involve metacognition in a way that the surface ones do not: review and revision at the discourse level involve the reexamination and frequently the restatement on one's thought. The surface writer, on the other hand, simply states what is known. Those process differences determine outcome differences. The outcome of a deep approach is a fresh way of looking at the matter at

> hand, whereas the outcome of a surface approach is at best a new accretion of known data. To put it another way, a deep approach leads to outcomes that are qualitatively different from the prior imputes, whereas a surface a surface approach leads only to quantitative rearrangements of previously existing data. (p.211)

In a psychometric investigation, Lavelle (1993) and identified five distinct factors representing college writers' beliefs about themselves and writing, and the strategies that college writers use. The first factor "Elaborationist" is marked by a search for personal meaning--self investment, and by viewing writing as symbolic representing a deep, personal orientation. Elaborative writing was not predictive of course grade in composition possibly because the educational system does not largely recognize or value this style. Only recently has first person even become acceptable in academic articles. Similarly, researchers in examining learning styles of college students, have defined an elaborative processing style related to deep learning as based on using a self-referencing strategy in learning (Schmeck, Geisler-Brenstein & Cercy, 1991). The second factor "Low Self-Efficacy" describes a highly fearful writer inclined to doubt ability and to think about writing as a painful task. Writers scoring high on this scale are virtually without a strategy and represent the "flip" side or dark side of the elaborative style. College writing performance had previously been associated with self-efficacy (Meier, Mc Carthy & Schmeck, 1984; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1993) and self-esteem (Daly & Wilson, 1983). "Reflective Revisionist", the third factor, describes a deep writing orientation based on a sophisticated understanding of the revision process as a remaking or rebuilding of one's thinking. Reflective revisionists take charge in writing to make a meaning. The fourth factor "Spontaneous Impulsive" profiles an impulsive and nonplanful style similar to Biggs' surface restrictive approach. Spontaneous Impulsive writers may overestimate their skill because they are actually afraid to deal with what they perceive as their limitations--they hide behind their writing. The "Procedural" Style represents a method-oriented style based on adherence to rules and a minimal amount of involvement similar to Bereiters'

communicative or Biggs' surface elaborative-- "where can I put this information that I just came across?" If you are unsure of yourself, the rules keep you afloat or as Stafford says in Writing the Australian Crawl (1978),

> But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant: and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them--without any prejudgements about the specific gravity of the topic or reasonableness of their expectations--will result in creative progress. (p.23)

Reflective Revisionist and Elaborationist represent deep orientations with Procedural, Spontaneous-Impulsive and Low Self-Efficacy representing a surface orientation. Reflective revisionist represents a deep thinking component and Elaborationist reflects the more personal and affective dimension of writing. It is hypothesized that an elaborative approach is related to quality in narrative writing (Lavelle, in press). High scores on Reflective Revisionist were predictive of high grades in freshman composition and high scores on Low Self-Efficacy were predictive of poor grades in the same course.

Conclusions: Writing and Composition

A taxonomy of writing styles has been advanced with the intention of raising awareness of the differential approach to understanding college writing, the constructs of deep and surface writing, and the role of selfhood in affecting writing strategies and outcomes.

Deep Style	Surface Style
Metacognitive, Reflective	Redundant, Reproductive
High or alternating level of focus	Focus at the local level
Hierarchical organization	Linear, sequential structure
Engagement, self-referencing	Detachment
Actively making meaning (agentic)	Passive ordering of data
Audience concern	Less audience concern
Thinks about essay as an integrated whole	Sees essay as an organized display
Thesis-driven	Data-driven
Revision	Editing
Transforming, going beyond assignment	Telling within the given context
Autonomous	Rule-bound
Teacher independent	Teacher dependent

Clearly, surface writing persists at the college level. Indeed, a good deal of surface thinking as linear and sequential rather than "thesis supporting" is reflected throughout modern culture-- television programs comprised of a series of short irrelated scenes--perhaps the only common factor is they all occur in the same setting. Similarly, college students have grown up in an educational environment that teaches surface writing. From fill the blanks, matching and short answers to grading college essays based on "hitting the major points", our system has fostered the acquisition of discreet bits of irrelated information rather than integration and meaning. We have taught writing often at the expense of composition. How can we move students from "bed-to-bed writing" toward true composition or depth in thinking and writing?

Students' writing styles are not alone in affecting writing performance: teachers' beliefs about the nature and complexity of composition affects their own behavior which, in turn, influences student performance (cf. Good & Brophy, 1990). The stylistic models of college writing represented in the deep/surface taxonomy offer practitioners a dynamic and

succinct model. By being familiar with the nature of the deep and surface approaches to writing as involving both beliefs about self as writer and conceptions of writing, and patterns of writing strategies, teachers can develop a richer interpretation. Facilitating development in college writing then means fostering "writing selfhood". That is, student writers need to be empowered as makers of their own meanings. Indeed, intentionality rests on who one thinks one is. Creating a warm and supportive climate is essential–one where a wide range of performance is valued and affiliation is encouraged. Teachers might also support perspective taking or changing strategies as an essential step in writing development. Remember, writers are, at least in part, victims of the educational system.

Along the same line, the educational system needs to move toward recognizing and rewarding elaborative, self-invested writing (It is only recently that first person has become somewhat acceptable in academic journals.) This does not mean that narrative writing be given more emphasis, although that would be appropriate, rather that personal perspective be honored in academic or objective essays and that students be given opportunities to write about their personal experience with particular topics or educational situations. Why have we so often asked writers to remove themselves from their products?

Moxley (1987) states:

> If the assumption is correct that self-involvement is a critical ingredient of learning, writing teachers as well as all teachers who use writing in their classes, must find ways to alter students' dependent, defeatist attitudes. Writing that is shaped in response to purely external demands is likely to be...an ordeal of self-flagellation and humiliation. (p.18)

Given the role of selfhood in writing, teachers can foster development in writing by ensuring that all students have positive experiences, or opportunities for success. Suggestions would include discussing students' writing histories, including ungraded or pass/fail assignments, co-operative assignments and providing opportunities for modelling and individualized instruction.

Teachers can specify deep definitions of the essay rather than imply or infer such conceptions (cf. Stanton, 1984). Too often expectations are not clearly delineated, especially in content areas. Professors require X papers over the term, often with little emphasis on expectations. Expectations always need to be clearly delineated via handouts and discussions and whatever else it takes. Also, teachers in content areas need to be open to revision and resubmission because the power of the paper lies in the opportunity that it presents to learn rather than as an evaluative tool. Even the strategies that students use to optimize learning differ from those used in assessment situations (Biggs, 1988b). Teachers in content areas might consider using more personal types of writing such as journal or consider collaborative writing assignements.

Writing style theories have much to offer pratitioners and researchers; they represent a comprehensive model reflective of the situation of writing to include both the interior and exterior writing environments. Here, personal beliefs are linked to the processes which affect composition outcomes. Future research might include consideration of the interrelationship of personal variables and beliefs as related to processes and outcomes in written composition.

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